

BACKGROUND

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INS' Southwest Border Strategy

In February 1994, Attorney General Janet Reno and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Commissioner Doris Meissner announced an innovative, multi-year strategy to strengthen enforcement of the nation's immigration laws and to disrupt the traditional illegal immigration corridors along the nation's Southwest border. Under the bold strategy, new personnel, backed with equipment and infrastructure improvements, are deployed in targeted areas each year, starting with the most vulnerable areas.

The strategy treats the entire 2,000-mile border as a single, seamless entity. Enforcement activities between the ports of entry are integrated fully with those taking place in the ports, which the strategy recognizes as both vital to the nation's economy and potential entry points for criminals and contraband. As a result, INS has been able to enhance its enforcement capabilities while dramatically reducing waiting times for those trying to cross the border legally.

INS has achieved considerable success in restoring integrity and safety to the Southwest border by implementing the strategy through well-laid-out, multi-year operations, such as Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego, Operation Hold the Line in El Paso, Operation Rio Grande in Laredo, and Operation Safeguard in Tucson. The initial phases of these operations typically result in an increase in apprehensions, reflecting the deployment of more agents and enhanced technology. However, as the deterrent effect takes hold, the number of apprehensions declines as the operation gains control over the area.

California

Launched in October 1994, Operation Gatekeeper has proven that deterrence works. Initially, the operation focused on five miles of Imperial Beach that accounted for nearly 25 percent of all illegal border crossings nationwide. Once the Border Patrol regained control of this heavily trafficked stretch, Gatekeeper was expanded to include the entire 66-miles of border under the San Diego Sector's jurisdiction. As a result, apprehensions in FY 1998 reached an 18-year low in the sector, which accounted for 45 percent of all apprehensions nationwide before Gatekeeper but only 16 percent in FY 1998.

Spurred by these dramatic results, INS extended Gatekeeper in FY 1998 into California's Imperial Valley. The expanded operation targets alien smuggling rings that moved to the El Centro area in response to the increased Border Patrol presence in San Diego. Under the El Centro initiative, in FY 1998, 140 agents were detailed to the El Centro Sector, an 80 percent increase in manpower level that gave the Sector the

ability to staff checkpoint operations around the clock. Apprehensions climbed to more than 226,580 in FY 1998, an increase of 55 percent over FY 1997.

In FY 1999, 78 agents will be deployed to El Centro. In the next few years, as the operation takes hold, apprehensions are expected to decline. A clear indication of the initiative's deterrent effect is that alien smugglers have raised their fees from \$250 per person to as much as \$1,500.

Texas and New Mexico

Operation Hold the Line, initiated in the El Paso Sector in 1993 produced a 50 percent decline in apprehensions from FY 1993 to FY 1996. Building on that success INS launched Operation Rio Grande in August 1997 to gain control of the border in the Rio Grande Valley and ultimately expand the coverage of these two Operations across all of Texas and New Mexico. The plan developed by INS field managers was tailored to meet unique local challenges and conditions. As part of Rio Grande, 260 new Border Patrol agents were added to the McAllen Sector and 205 agents to the Laredo Sector in FY 1998, increases of 34 percent and 46 percent respectively over 1997. The agents' effectiveness was enhanced by the deployment of resource multiplying technology such as infrared scopes, night-vision goggles, underground sensors, and IDENT (an automated fingerprint identification system) terminals. Infrastructure along the border was also improved by installing fences and constructing all-weather roads.

Operation Rio Grande is divided into three targeted corridors. The operation began, and is now firmly established, in Corridor 1, encompassing McAllen, Brownsville, and Laredo. In FY 1998 apprehensions decreased by 35 percent in the Brownsville area and by 27 percent in Laredo from the last fiscal year. The flow of illegal immigrant traffic shifted to other corridors. Falfurrias Station, in Corridor 2, experienced a nearly 40 percent increase in apprehensions over FY 1997. The 500 agents being deployed in FY 1999 will expand the coverage of Operation Rio Grande as well as maintaining the success of Operation Hold the Line, ultimately leading to greater control over illegal entries across Texas and New Mexico.

Rio Grande has provided clear evidence that border operations improve the quality of life in border communities by contributing to falling crime rates. Both Brownsville and Laredo reported a drop in criminal activity during FY 1998, with the crime rate falling by more than 20 percent in Brownsville alone. These results mirror the decline in criminal activities that has accompanied INS operations in other areas, including San Diego and El Paso.

Arizona

Launched in FY 1995, Operation Safeguard redirected illegal border crossings away from urban areas near the Nogales port of entry to comparatively open areas that the Border Patrol could more effectively control. By moving potential crossers away from urban areas where they were able to disappear into local communities, the Border Patrol has taken advantage of new equipment and technology and increased staffing to

make apprehensions in areas where illegal entrants are more visible. Today there are more than 1,000 agents on duty in the sector compared to fewer than 300 prior to FY 1994.

As in other operations, the infusion of agents has been backed by a wealth of new equipment and technology. In addition to IDENT terminals, crucial improvements include the installation of 19 additional remote low-light surveillance cameras along the border in Nogales and Douglas making it possible for one officer to monitor border activity at several different locations simultaneously, freeing up more agents to patrol the line.

In January, 100 agents were detailed to the Nogales area. As part of the FY 1999 expansion of Operation Safeguard, Tucson Sector will receive 350 new Border Patrol agents. In addition to increased manpower, border access roads in the greater Nogales area will be improved. Plans also include the installation of four miles of border lighting in Nogales and three miles of lighting in Douglas, expanding the existing 1.3 miles already in place.

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